



Mark (right) plays chess with his cousin, Mike, just before their 1974 bicycle trip started.

(Portions of the following article are from the author's book, "Unfinished Miles, One Man's Unthinkable Journey."—Ed.)

Unthinkable

Wild at heart—that's what Mike and I were. We also were cousins and best friends. Life for us was one big adventure.

By Mark Manion

One day, I got this crazy idea of going on a long-distance bicycle trip. Mike jumped on the idea, and our trip came alive. It grew to be a planned four-month trek, beginning in San Diego, Calif., and ending in Ely, Minn., up by the Canadian border. Backpacking at Mt. Shasta, innertubing down the Sacramento River, and canoeing and camping in Canada all were woven into our bicycling



Ashore

itinerary for this killer trip.

Let's fast-forward to the fourth day of our trip. It had been a scorcher—the temperature was 103 degrees in the shade. It was too hot to ride, so Mike and I spent the afternoon swimming at a community pool. We were going to ride that evening when it was cooler. Fortunately, we had lights and reflectors for night riding. We even wore light-colored clothing to make ourselves more visible. About 9:30 p.m., we were tiring and pulled over to the side of the road to check out a map for a place to stay.

From our map, it looked like the next town was 15 to 20 miles ahead, about an hour's ride away. That town was going to be our next stop. We got back on our bicycles and continued pedaling.

We pedaled on and on. It was a peaceful night. Stars were scattered in the sky above. The only sounds were the few our bicycles made and, now and then, the cranking noise of an oil pump somewhere in the dark.

For the first time tonight, some lights came at us head-on. They got brighter and brighter, nearly blinding us, and then—

being firmly etched in my mind, the horror of horrors. I thought about my toe-clips, the leather straps that went over the top of my feet so I could both pull up and push down when pedaling. They made for more efficient pedaling. What I used to fear was getting trapped in them and not being able to back out my feet fast enough if I had to react in a split instant.

Here it was happening to me—both of my ankles snapped, the only thing they could do to free me from my bicycle. Then the fender of the car ripped into the back of my right thigh, tearing it open right down to the bone. As I was whipped back across the hood of the car, which was doing in excess of 60 mph, my neck was broken—the force actually causing my skull to get wrenched off my spine. I then crashed into the windshield, shattering it and gashing open the back of my left shoulder. Finally, some 200 feet farther down the road, two-thirds the length of a football field, thump! I landed on the side of the road. It was a hard hit.

There was another instant of clanging, twisting metal and then a silence—a very loud, frightening silence. Miraculously, I still was conscious. I hurt from my head down to my toes—we are talking major pain—I couldn't

move I hurt so bad. I just lay there—helpless, broken up, and bleeding to death. "Wake up!" I thought. "Wake up! Please be a dream." Tears welled up in my eyes. I knew this situation was bad.

"Mike...Mike, help me." I cried out. There was no answer.

"Mike, help me." Still there was no answer. The silence was deafening. Oh, how I hurt.

"Mike—are you all right? Mike."

"I don't believe this—somebody wake me up from this nightmare. Please don't be true, please, God! Aghh!"

I hurt—I hurt badly—but then I couldn't really tell. My body had gone into a state of shock, and, rather than any sharp pains, it was more like an overall ache. It seemed as if my mind had separated from my body. It was as though my mind were sitting off to the side,

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whoosh!—a big truck went by. Its tailwind hit us square in the face, slowing us down to a crawl. It made us appreciate the few trucks that came from behind, whose lights did not blind us and whose tailwinds actually helped push us along.

This hour must've been the busy time of night because, a few minutes later, some more lights closed in on us from behind...They got brighter and brighter, and—CRUNCH!—"What the...?" I barely had a chance to glance over my shoulder when my back tire blew out, and my bicycle started buckling right beneath me.

I went into slow motion—everything

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Taken Aug. 6, 1974—the day before the tragic crash occurred—this photo shows Mike with his and Mark's bikes.

watching me lay there, unable to do a thing about it. An eternity of time passed. I was getting out of focus. Life was draining from me.

*Our trip just died—it ceased, was no more,
The unfinished miles, my mind to explore.*

Mike was only 18 years old; I was 19. Mike was a spark plug of life. He loved to surf and to run and swim. He always put a smile on your face. He had an infectious, happy attitude—the kind you like to be around. I, too, liked sports. I had earned varsity letters in tennis, played on a championship soccer team, and loved downhill skiing. We both worked hard and played hard. We felt invincible. We thought we had the world by the tail. Life seemed so easy. How quickly things can change. Someone heard the crash and called for help.

An ambulance had arrived, and I was being

strapped to a gurney. I still was conscious and putting up a fight. “Let me sit up,” I pleaded. “I just need to sit up. I’m going to be all right.” I was struggling to get up, to get free. Nobody was going to tie me down. I can beat this thing; nothing is going to keep me down, nothing! “Let me up!”

The ambulance attendant kept telling me to lie still, that I’d be all right, but I wasn’t going to buy it. I needed to move; I needed to sit up. This whole thing was not going to happen to me. He tightened the belts holding me to the gurney, and, with help from the driver, they loaded me, writhing as I was, into the back of the ambulance. It was lit up inside the ambulance.

“What about my cousin? Where’s he?” I asked.

The attendant looked at me solemnly [and said], “I’m sorry, your cousin didn’t make it.” A sheet was pulled over the body on the other gurney.

“No! Let me up! No!” I was in torment. This tragedy couldn’t be happening; we were invincible. We had a whole trip to finish. I still was struggling to get up. I tried to force myself awake; this had to be a nightmare. I was not waking up, though, because I was awake. It was all too real. The ambulance sped off to the hospital in the nearest city, which happened to be Bakersfield. I felt entombed in the back of the ambulance; its walls were closing in on me.

After a long ride, we arrived at the hospital. It was 11 o’clock at night. The rear doors to the ambulance opened, and I was pulled out. The emergency-entrance doors to the hospital opened, and I was pushed inside into a brightly lit corridor. I felt very cold and weak. Then my mind went blank... Death was knocking on my door.

That night was a seesaw battle for my life: I went into respiratory arrest and stopped breathing, they revived me; I stopped breathing again, they revived me again. The next morning, my mom was contacted and told of my situation. She was told

Mark and other family
members visit his cousin's
grave in April 1975.

to take a flight, rather than drive, if she hoped to see me alive. I don't know how many of you are parents, but that news is heart-crushing. Parents expect their children to outlive them.

My mom called our church and enlisted their prayers, believing in a miracle. She then flew to Bakersfield. I was paralyzed but still alive—a miracle in itself. That week, there were angels and dreams and a host of other things to let my mom know God was at work—to encourage her. My mom was optimistic.

Then came Saturday. Kern County Hospital was a teaching hospital, and a number of doctors were on my case, both specialists and interns. They had a big conference to go over my case and my prognosis, and they came to a general consensus. My mom then was told of their opinion.

"Mrs. Manion," the head doctor began, "I'm sorry to tell you, but it is our general consensus that your son, Mark, is a C-3 quadriplegic and is irretrievable."

"C-3 quadriplegic, irretrievable, IRRetrievable, IRRETRIEVable, IRRETRIEVABLE!" The word kept resonating in my mom's mind. "You mean this is it? Mark is going to be paralyzed from the neck down for the rest of his life? Isn't there anything else you can do?" There was a pleading tone in Mom's voice.

"I'm afraid we've done all we can. Mark still will need to have his neck fused to stabilize it and to prevent further injury. He is not out of the woods yet, but we feel he is stable enough to transport him to a hospital in San Diego for further care and rehabilitation."

"This is terrible. I don't know how Mark is going to deal with it. He loves sports so much."

Yes, this was terrible. I was paralyzed from the neck down, a la superman, Christopher Reeves. I was given a tracheotomy and hooked up to a respirator for breathing. I was spoon-fed or tube-fed. Toileting and bathing had to be handled by somebody else. Life no longer was easy; it was tough.



Let me give you an idea of what it feels like to be paralyzed from the neck down. First, put your arms down by your side (please don't try this while driving a motor vehicle). Next, pretend you cannot move your arms or legs or body. You can't even wiggle your fingers or toes. Now, pretend that a fly lands on your cheek. Try to get rid of him. You blow out the side of your mouth or yell for a nurse or someone else to help. You can drive a nurse nuts—I assure you.

Senseless crashes like mine affect so many people. Nurses, doctors and medical personnel are affected deeply. Family and friends are devastated. All have a hard time dealing with the aftermath of such a tragedy. Believe it or not, even you, the readers, are affected because you miss out on the blessing of getting to meet my cousin this side of heaven.

I, too, was affected profoundly. I spent the next five months at TriGeneral Hospital. I went from 165 pounds down to 95. I was dying slowly. Unbeknownst to the doctors, fluid was building up on my brain, turning me into a vegetable. I also suffered from short-term memory loss.

I was transferred to another hospital and again operated on. The surgeon put a permanent shunt (tube) in my head to drain off excess fluid, and then I hallucinated that I walked away from the surgery. Hallucinations are like real life to those having them. I really believed I could walk, and the surgery was a success, even though my mom and

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nurse told me differently. How would you feel if you found out you were paralyzed?

As I continued lying there, thinking up a storm, another thought came to me—only this thought was more distressing than all the others. What if... the thought did not want to finish itself. It was a thought I did not want to entertain. There was no room for it in my life. I tried to think of something else. But, what if, what if I really couldn't walk? What if I were paralyzed? What if I'd hallucinated walking away from the operating room after my surgery? No way, that's a crazy thought—of course, I can walk. I hate "what ifs."

Surely the drugs would've worn off by now. I tried to move my legs. Nothing, maybe just a twitch, and maybe I was imagining that... I tried again and again and again, expending every ounce of energy I had, trying to get them to move. "Please move," my heart cried out. They wouldn't listen to me. I didn't want to believe it. My own legs were betraying me. They wouldn't budge. No way! Not me! There was a battle going on in my mind, and I was losing it. Finally, after repeated attempts, I conceded. Mom must be right; I couldn't move them. Damn! There goes this skiing season; by the time I get them back in shape, it'll be over. Listen to me complain; at least, I'm still alive. I'll be up and running in no time at all. I can beat this thing.

As I continued to lie there, and I wasn't going anywhere, my thinking up a storm became more like thinking up a hurricane. There was something else Mom had said that was beginning to sink in. She had said being paralyzed from my neck down would mean my arms, too. No way, I thought; that's an absurd thought. Of course, I can move my arms. I tried to move them, and that absurd thought became all too real. My brain was saying, "Move," but my arms wouldn't listen. Tears filled my eyes. This fate was worse than death. No, get a grip, Manion; you're a fighter.

Dad did not raise a quitter.

I lay there for a long time, immersed in an ocean of thoughts, wondering just how long this all was going to go on. How could this happen to me? Hey, I was 19. I was invincible.

How, indeed, could this happen? It started with four guys who got into a car. The driver was 23 years old. The right front passenger was 19, and the two fellows in the back seat each were 17. They were out having some fun. Unfortunately, their fun included some drinking and driving—bad choice, really bad choice!

I'm a strong Christian and go by the Bible, but, even if you don't, it has some very good words of advice. It says, "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery." (Eph. 5:18) Debauchery is like a moral lapse. It also says, "Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler, whoever is led astray by them is not wise." (Pro. 20:1)

Under the influence of alcohol or other drugs, many people make foolish choices, such as getting behind the wheel of a car—a choice that can have devastating, life-changing consequences. And, it happens more often than you think. In 2001, over 17,000 people were killed in the United States in alcohol-related crashes. You'd have to repeat the events of 9-11 five days in a row to approximate that number, and those are just the ones killed. Several hundred thousand people also are injured, and this tragedy goes on year after year. The sad thing is that all these deaths and injuries are preventable.

How would you feel if you killed or crippled somebody? How would you deal with it? How would you like to be a drunk, running back down a road to try and...?

The car that struck us lost control farther down the road and was disabled when it crashed into a sign... Before striking the sign, the driver had commented, "I think we hit a cow." He



Family members surround Mark during his November 1974 visit from the hospital for Thanksgiving.

wanted to fix the blown front tire and take off again.

The right front passenger wasn't so sure. "No, I think we hit somebody," he said. With that, his brother, who had been sitting in the back seat, bolted out of the car and ran back down the road into the darkness of the night. As he neared where my cousin and I were lying, it got very creepy. It was pitch-dark, and he couldn't see a thing, but he heard a haunting click-click-click...the sound of a lone, 10-speed tire still turning. Then he came upon my crumpled body. He bent over, lit a match to see, and was sickened by what he saw. There I lay in a pool of blood; it still was gurgling from my mouth. With fearful concern in his eyes, he put his hand on my forehead and pleaded, "You're going to be OK. I'm going to go get help. Please...please don't die."

This sight is cemented in the fellow's mind for the rest of his life. The crash occurred in 1974. In 1997, my wife and I were in his city and had lunch with him and his wife. I had the chance to tell him face-to-face that I'd forgiven him and the others in the car. He shed some tears and told me he'd do anything to take back that day. He said his brother still gets nightmares. I'd met with him four years earlier—he, too, had cried. The driver of the car got a prison sentence. I'm all for harsh penalties, but what's worse is the prison of one's mind—living with the guilt of what you caused or were a part of. All four of those fellows live in that prison. Please don't make the same mistake.

How can you avoid making that mistake?

Not drinking at all is a surefire way. The next best solution is to **think before you drink**, not after your decision-making is tainted. Have a game plan before you're put in a situation where you're tempted to compromise your safety or that of others. Consider how you're going to get from Point A to Point B. Here are a few suggestions: Have a designated driver. Make sure you have enough money left for cab fare, and take one. Call a friend or family member (who hasn't been drinking) for a ride. Or, just rent a room, or sleep over where you are. These little inconveniences are trite, compared to becoming another statistic.

What you've read is but a smidgen of my story. I didn't write it for you to feel sorry for me, because I have a super life. God has blessed me with a gem of a wife, two darling daughters, a nice home, good friends, and a wonderful church. I still work hard, yet have lots of fun. There's not enough room here to tell you all the miraculous things that have happened to me. I've written this article with the hope it will help you make good choices—ones that will keep you from an unthinkable journey. ■

Mark is a sought-after speaker and author. He recently was honored by Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) as Volunteer of the Year for 2002. In reading his inspirational book, "Unfinished Miles, One Man's Unthinkable Journey," you find yourself laughing on one page and crying on the next. But, mostly, you are encouraged and left with a bit more hope. You can purchase Mark's book (and new video or poster) at www.drunkbusters.com or by calling toll-free 1-888-808-5440. Mark can be reached at 1-858-565-6702. Special thanks to Curt Kindschuh, president of Drunk Busters of America, L.L.C., for introducing me to Mark Manion and his powerful story.—Ed.